





## JOHN JOSEPH PERSHING IN LACLEDE

John Joseph Pershing, Commander in Chief of the American Expeditionary Forces in Europe during World War I and named General of the Armies by Special Act of Congress in 1919, was born on September 13, 1860, in a small section house of the old Hannibal and St. Joseph Railroad near Laclede, Missouri.

Pershing's father was John Fletcher Pershing, a fourth generation American of German-Alsatian ancestry. He was born in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, on March 1, 1834. He remained in Westmoreland County until 1858, when at twenty-three, he set out for the West working his way to Missouri on flatboats.

In February, 1858, John Fletcher Pershing arrived in St. Louis. He went to work on the railroads, first as a partner in the subcontracting firm of Stone, Pershing, and Jennings, helping to build a track from St. Louis to Macon, Missouri. He later took a job as the foreman of a track-laying section on the Hannibal and St. Joseph Railroad.

In 1859, he married Ann Elizabeth Thompson who lived with her parents, James and Polly Thompson, on a farm near Warrenton, Missouri. The Thompson family, of Anglo-Saxon ancestry, was of old Virginia stock, having moved westward after the American Revolution. Ann was born near Maryville, Tennessee, on February 15, 1835.

After their marriage, John F. and Ann Pershing moved to Laclede, in Linn County, and lived for a while in the section house on the Hannibal and St. Joseph Railroad, now part of the Burlington Railroad.

John J. Pershing was the first of nine children born to John Fletcher and Ann Pershing. Of the nine children, six survived — three boys and three girls. Shortly after young John was born, the family moved to a house in the town of Laclede. His father then began to rise to prominence in the affairs of Laclede, buying the general store, becoming postmaster of the town and captain of the home guard, and taking an active part in church affairs.

On June 18, 1864, three-year-old John J. Pershing encountered the violence of war for the first time. A band of Confederate irregulars attacked Laclede directing their terrorism at the pro-Union citizens of the town. John Fletcher Pershing was a staunch Union sympathizer. In the attack, several men of the town were killed, but the Pershing family escaped injury although the family's



general store was looted.

There was very little in John J. Pershing's early life to suggest that he would one day lead a victorious army in the greatest war the world had ever known. His was the usual boyhood of fishing, fighting (at which he was evidently quite good), and mischief. However, fishing, fighting, and mischief did not take up all of his time as a boy. The Pershing children were expected to be industrious in both their studies and their chores.

Young John was introduced to the strenuous manual labor of farming early in his life. After the Civil War, Pershing's father bought a lumber yard and two 160-acre farms in addition to the general store he already owned. Also, in the fall of 1886, he bought the home (now restored) and moved his family into it. Young John, aged 6, was expected to help with the farming — first pulling weeds and other small jobs and gradually, as he became older, working at the bigger jobs such as helping with the planting and harvesting, milking, and even breaking colts.

The farming experience that Pershing acquired stood the family in good stead a few years later. With the panic of 1873, the John F. Pershings lost all of their holdings except for the home and one of the farms. In order to supplement the family income, Pershing's father went to work for a St. Joseph clothing company as a traveling salesman. His absence placed the responsibility of tending to the farm on his two oldest sons, John J. and James. Young John worked on the farm while he completed his education, consistently ranking at the top of his class.

While completing his secondary education, John acquired a desire to attend college and become a lawyer. He knew, however, that he would have to find some way to finance his own education

now that the family had lost most of its wealth. The opportunity came with a teaching position at Prairie Mound School, nine miles south of Laclede, in Chariton County. Pershing taught school at Prairie Mound at various times during 1879 and 1881 at \$35 a month. He earned enough money to attend Kirksville Normal School (now Northeast Missouri State Teachers College) in between teaching jobs. He began a course of study leading to a degree in Scientific Didactics (a course in education) in February, 1879. He completed the requirements in June, 1880, and returned to his teaching position at Prairie Mound.

In the fall of 1881, Pershing returned to Kirksville to continue his education with the eventual goal of becoming a lawyer. It was at this time that the thought of service to his country first entered his mind. He saw a newspaper ad concerning the competitive examination for entrance to the United States Military Academy at West Point. He decided it was a chance for a free education and so he took the test on October 20, 1881. He qualified and was nominated to the Academy. He entered an Academy preparatory school under the direction of Caleb Huse in Highland Falls, New York, in early 1882. In July of 1882, he reported to West Point as a "plebe" or freshman.

## SOME FACTS ABOUT THE HOME

Indications are that the Pershing Boyhood Home was built in 1857, two years after the town of Laclede, Missouri was founded.

The Pershing family acquired the property in 1866 when the future general was a boy of six, and made it their home at least until the time John J. was appointed to West Point in 1882. Some time after 1882, the family moved from Laclede and two other families lived in the house until it was purchased and presented to the State of Missouri in 1952.

The home has been restored by the Missouri State Park Board. It is furnished of the period of occupancy by the Pershing family.

On September 13, 1960, as a part of the nationwide celebration to honor General Pershing, the home was dedicated as a public shrine to the memory of Pershing and the soldiers who fought under him in World War I when he was Commander-in-Chief of the American Expeditionary Forces.

This home is open to the public daily, except Mondays, New Year's, Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas Days, from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. The Sunday hours, Memorial Day through Labor Day are from 12:00 noon to 5:00 p.m. The charges are: Age 6-12, 25c — Over, 50c.

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